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The Mother Narrative Transformed: Criminalizing the Immigrant Mother in Jordi Sierra i Fabra's "Barrios altos"

Abstract

With the ongoing financial crisis and the influx of refugees and other migrant communities in Spain, the "immigrant problem," combined with a narrative that reflects upon the economic crisis, has become a focal point for numerous genres, including that of crime fiction. While the immigrant narrative has been mostly presented from the vantage point of the autochthonous community, recent contributions to migrant literature in Spain have refocalized this perspective, and privilege the immigrant's plight to evoke the reader's empathy. This article examines how Jordi Sierra i Fabra's 2013 "Barrios altos" ("A High-End Neighborhood," 2011) problematizes the representation of the immigrant mother in contemporary Spanish crime literature. By exploring how and why the Filipino maid, Felipa, is criminalized in Sierra i Fabra's short story, this article argues that Sierra i Fabra combines a narrative of criminalization with a revenge narrative to complicate our reading of the immigrant mother, a character that cannot be read as a criminal unless she is understood as a victim as well. The immigrant mother's hybrid condition in Sierra i Fabra's short story signifies a transformation of the mother in crime fiction by presenting a character type that transgresses the border between victimhood and criminality due to a heightening in her maternal vulnerability.

Keywords

immigrant mothers in crime fiction, Jordi Sierra i Fabra, "Barrios altos", "A High-End Neighborhood", criminal mothers, criminal mother narrative

Cover Page Footnote

This article forms part of a larger project of studying motherhood in crisis. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the NEMLA conference in March 2017.

The Mother Narrative Transformed: Criminalizing the Immigrant Mother in Jordi Sierra i Fabra's "Barrios altos"

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When we think of the role of the mother in crime or suspense genres, our thoughts often turn to a castrating maternal figure responsible for her son's criminalization and subsequent transformation into a serial killer. Norma Bates, in Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959), Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 filmic adaptation, and the more recent television series, *Bates Motel*, is a primary example of this maternal trope.¹ While the symbol of the monstrous or castrating mother is not particular to the twentieth century, a new version of the maternal emerged alongside the revised motherhood discourses born of feminist and other liberation movements of the 1970s. These movements created, to use E. Ann Kaplan's words, "a crisis in the area of nurturing" that continues to predominate in contemporary fictional and visual narratives (141). And yet, as Kaplan rightly points out, "there has been little real exploration of the deep, underlying cultural dilemmas that motherhood involves on both an economic/social/institutional level and on the psychoanalytic one" (139). With the increase in terrorism and political violence of the last twenty years as well as the global financial collapse of 2008, however, the figure of the mother, specifically of the criminal mother, has been revisited. A new discourse about her has surfaced, one in which the maternal function is clearly in crisis and so necessitates her visibility.

In response to the extreme impacts of the financial downturn of 2008 in Spain, social movements, such as 15-M and, more recently, those protesting gender violence and femicide, cultural production in the form of films, music, art, and literature have emerged. The crisis has also sparked a crime fiction publishing boom as writers of detective and crime fiction are using the genre in its novelistic, short story, and graphic form to explore the social effects of the economic collapse in Spain.² Moreover, with the recent influx of Syrian refugees and other migrant communities in Spain, immigration and the changes it has brought to the sociocultural landscape has also become a focal point for numerous genres, including that of crime literature. According to Shanna Lino, Spanish crime fiction has been addressing the country's immigration policies and the criminalization of migrant communities since before the 2007-2008 crisis:

a growing group of authors . . . since 2001[] have addressed issues surrounding contemporary immigration to Spain within the well-established generic codes of crime fiction. . . . [They] range from the classic hardboiled and police procedural varieties to more experimental subgenres that engage

the postmodern and postcolonial conceptions of truth and identity.
("Mediated Moralities" 37)

Although Lino refers to the longer narrative form, her argument also applies to the short story genre. Since 2001, and more poignantly since the crisis, the authors who employ shorter narratives have utilized the crime fiction story to problematize the harsh economic and social reality surrounding immigrant incorporation.

Mostly presented from the vantage point of the autochthonous community, recent contributions to literature depicting migrants in Spain have refocalized this perspective, instead privileging the immigrant's plight and evoking the reader's empathy. Concentrating on the representation of the female migrant domestic worker in crime fiction, Jordi Sierra i Fabra's 2013 "Barrios altos" ("A High-End Neighborhood" 2011) complicates immigrant integration in contemporary Catalan society by demonstrating the process by which the Filipino maid and mother, Felipa, is criminalized. Felipa poisons and kills the high-class Barcelona family that she works for in response to the years of abuse that she has suffered at their hands. The narrative explores a politics of vulnerability in relation to this immigrant mother, but in doing so, also links vulnerability to forms of resistance. As Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay argue, "vulnerability emerges as part of social relations, even as a feature of social relations" (4) because "vulnerability and invulnerability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power" (5). While vulnerability is oftentimes related to victimization, it can also take part in "strategies of resistance" (6). In the case of the immigrant mother and domestic worker, Felipa, rebellion and resistance come in the form of criminalization, but also evoke empathy.³ I argue that "Barrios altos" employs a narrative of vulnerability to evoke feelings of empathy and complicity in the reader by staging and detailing what drives the protagonist to violence.

By creating a space for the reader to engage on a subjective level, "Barrios altos" elicits a reaction, a resistance to sociopolitical frameworks that increase the vulnerability of female migrant domestic workers like Felipa.⁴ I demonstrate that the narrator's complicity in presenting Felipa's situation emphasizes the motives for her turn to crime, which according to Anna Maria Villalonga is what the feminized version of crime fiction looks to expose (see Geli).⁵ As Villalonga clarifies, there is a change in how female crime fiction represents violence in the genre because it is not meant for gratuitous pleasure or consumption by the reading public. Instead, it should be understood as a specific instrument for action. Maria Xosé Agra Romero has previously suggested in "Violencia(s)" ('Violence/s') that female crime fiction provides a generic space which allows readers not only to understand and accept that women are capable of violence, but also to reflect upon and examine their motives, their choice to resort to violence (20-21). The feminized

model of the genre demonstrates that the choice to resort to violence is often a response to certain contexts, whether these are political, social, or economic, or to a heightened sense of vulnerability, which I suggest is the case in “Barrios altos.” In “El relat negre femení en català” (“The Female Noir Story in Catalan”), Villalonga posits that while the personal and emotional component still play a crucial role in terms of the motive and drive to commit the criminal act, female violence is not framed as irrational or improvised in the woman-centered variety of the genre, but as structured and at times even rehearsed. Analyzing women offenders in this way and taking into account the political, social, or economic complications that frame their criminal acts problematizes the construct of the female delinquent, and this, I propose, is what Sierra i Fabra emphasizes in “Barrios altos.”

In Sierra i Fabra’s story, we witness firsthand the process by which Felipa is criminalized as the narrative takes us through how each member of the family displays their abuse and discrimination of her. Here, the narrative of criminalization combines with a revenge narrative. I claim, however, that the female migrant domestic worker cannot be read as a criminal unless she is understood as a victim, because this character type transgresses the border between victimhood and criminality. Lino has previously proposed that

la formulación *femme fatale* podrá presentar la enunciación más productiva para la reivindicación de la mujer en la novela negra sobre la inmigración ya que este personaje—femenino y *otro* por definición—encauza un desenlace que no encuadra necesariamente con el establecido orden patriarcal peninsular (“Víctima, detective y femme fatale” 67; *emphasis in original*)

The femme fatale formulation may present the most productive enunciation for the vindication of women in the crime novel about immigration since this character—female and *other* by definition—channels an outcome that does not necessarily fit with the established patriarchal Spanish peninsular order. (‘Victim, Detective, and Femme Fatale’ 67, *emphasis in original*)

In “Barrios altos,” however, there is a new formulation in which the female migrant bridges both the *mujer-víctima*, the female victim, and also the criminal state because she is a new hybrid form. Moreover, Felipa is not only a hybrid victim-criminal, but she is also an immigrant and a mother, and violence partly stems from her maternal function. Felipa, who has been consistently mistreated by the family that she has been working for, is finally pushed over the edge when her employers refuse to let her return to see her family in the Philippines. After all the abuse that she has suffered at their hands in order to send money back to her children and

mother, their refusal to allow her to see her children during Christmas compels her to enact her revenge. I argue that motherhood is responsible for Felipa's hybrid condition of victim-criminal, providing the link between victimization and criminalization. Motherhood functions as a threshold for violence propelled by the economic and immigration crises.

Since "Barrios altos" details a criminalization that is directly related to the maternal function, Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg's framework for analyzing female political violence by employing the mother, monster, and whore narratives proves particularly useful. In the mother narrative, "women, playing their role as mothers, even when it has gone awry, are not responsible for their 'maternal instincts', or the violence that they cause because of them" (Gentry and Sjoberg 80). I am particularly interested in how the mother narrative has been adapted in "Barrios altos" to address the sociopolitical and, though to a lesser extent, the economic situation in Spain. Felipa's justification for committing her crime employs the mother narrative to a certain extent, but also complicates it by establishing other motivating factors like the immigration and socioeconomic crises. In fact, I propose that the mother narrative is a changed narrative due to how these external factors have transformed it, causing motherhood itself to come into a state of heightened vulnerability.

In "Barrios altos" the mother narrative provides the framework for the crime since it is only after José María refuses to let Felipa return to the Philippines for Christmas that she makes the decision to kill the entire Morales Masdeu family. Here, the mother narrative takes on a different tone since Felipa's act of vengeance is not directly connected to her children, but more so is retribution for the abuse that she has suffered. Felipa's murder of her tormentors is purposeful, the result of the trauma that she has experienced, and not an impulsive or a rage-filled reaction. Rather she concocts a plan that requires detailed preparation and scheming. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4; *emphasis in original*). Subject to torment by each of the family members, this forces Felipa to confront her constant victimization and vulnerability, and as a result, to eliminate her victimizers.

The plot of "Barrios altos" mostly develops in the domestic sphere, more specifically in a high-class apartment in the Barcelona neighborhood of Turó Parc. It can be divided into two parts, the first detailing the abuse that Felipa suffers at the hands of each of the four family members and the second recounting the crime—her planning and later murder of the family. As the narrative is focalized through her for the most part, we experience and become witnesses to the abuse that she suffers from each of the family members. Beginning with Pelayo, the ten-year-old boy that she babysits, we witness the verbal abuse that she must endure as

we observe the barrage of insults and maltreatment that he hurls at the meek and passive Felipa:⁶

-Entonces acompáñame. Se supone que estás aquí para servirme, ¿no?
 -Entre otras cosas, señorito.
 -Eres más tonta... A veces entiendo que te echaran de tu país.
 -A mí no me echaron. Me vine a España para...
 -¡Bah, vete a la mierda! ¿Nos vamos o qué? (146)

“Then come with me. You’re supposed to be here to serve me, right?”
 “Among other things, master.”
 “You’re so stupid... Sometimes I understand why they kicked you out of your country.”
 “They didn’t kick me out. I came to Spain to—”
 “Oh, go to hell! Are we going or what?” (139)

Provoking a mix of disgust towards Pelayo and sympathy for the Filipino maid, the narrator further exposes the boy’s racist thinking when she tries to hold his hand and he refuses because “[d]ice que suda, que huele mal, que no es más que una india, como todas. Y cuando le recuerda que en Filipinas no son indios, él le dice que lo ha mirado en un mapa y que allí todos sí son indios, porque no se puede vivir tan lejos de América del Norte o de Europa sin ser indios” (147) ‘He says that she sweats, that she smells, that she’s nothing but an Indian, like all of them. And when she reminds him that in the Philippines they don’t have Indians, he says he looked it up on a map and they’re all Indians, because they can’t live that far from North America and Europe and not be Indians’ (140). The narrator further evokes our feelings of solidarity and empathy towards Felipa when we learn that the other mothers and babysitters leave the park upon seeing Pelayo enter: “algunas miradas convergen en ellos sin disimulo. Miradas de disgusto, miradas de rechazo. Miradas. . . . Las demás sirvientas ya no se le acercan. Las madres no hablan con ella. Está sola” (147) ‘people stare at them quite blatantly. Looks of disgust, looks of rejection. Looks. . . . Other nannies don’t come near her anymore. Mothers don’t talk to her. She’s alone’ (140). This avoidance and rejection by the other mothers and babysitters have to do with Pelayo’s actions, his cruelty towards her and the other children as well. Thus, the boy’s verbal abuse of Felipa further aggravates her state of vulnerability. Felipa is rejected not only by the family that she works for, but also by everyone who surrounds her, in particular those at the park who witness how the abusive Pelayo mistreats her. And yet, no one intervenes. Instead, they leave her alone with her abuser. The scene symbolically ends with a Turó Park that is slowly emptying until there are only two people left—Pelayo and Felipa. The

final image of the vacant Turó Park indicates the lack of a social response towards female migrant domestic workers who are victims of these types of abuse.

The next vignette not only reproduces the racist tone of the scene with Pelayo, but adds an extra element as Vanesa, the teenage daughter of the family, criticizes Felipa's sexuality and maternity. Like the episode with Pelayo, Turó Park also frames Felipa's encounter with the cruel teenager when she catches her with a boy in front of the apartment building as she gazes at the park from the balcony. Prior to seeing Vanesa, we are privy to the following reflection:

Si hace buen tiempo sale a la terraza y contempla los árboles silenciosos y oscuros, tan cerca de sus manos, tan lejos de su vida. Los barceloneses dicen que el Turó Park es el parque más bonito de la ciudad, pequeño, triangular, cómodo, lleno de rincones para perderse, sentarse, leer el periódico, tomar el sol en las zonas abiertas, pasear a los perros, jugar o caminar a la sombra de los altos, muy altos árboles y las masas de cuidados matorrales. Un parque de parejas de casa bien, de ancianos ricos auxiliados por sus acompañantes de rostros tristes y añorados y de niños con institutrices y criadas de uniforme, todas extranjeras, como ella misma.

Un parque de barrios altos. (148)

If the weather is good, she goes out to the balcony and gazes at the dark and silent trees, so close at hand, so far from her life. People in Barcelona say Turó is the city's most beautiful park: small, triangular, cozy, with plenty of places in which to get lost, to sit down, to read the paper, to absorb the sun in open spaces, to walk the dog, to play, or to amble about under the shadows of the tall trees and all the well-manicured shrubs. It's a park for prosperous couples, rich old men aided by assistants with sad faces full of longing, and children with governesses and uniformed maids, all foreign, just like her.

A park in a high-end neighborhood. (141)

As this reflection underscores, the park is beyond Felipa's reach, and she remains marginalized from it, unable to enjoy or become a part of it. Instead, distinctions and boundaries are reified: those who enjoy the high-end park versus those who work or care for the high-end park goers, immigrant women, foreigners like Felipa. The park symbolizes the lack of immigrant integration as these foreigners are visually "othered" either in their emotional responses to their situation or because of their required uniforms.

Unlike Pelayo, Vanesa is described as beautiful, but the narrator makes sure to affirm from the beginning that "es una zorra" (148) '[she] is . . . a slut' (141) and later adds to this saying that "[e]s una niña. También un diablo" (148) 'She's a mere

girl. A devil too' (141). After Felipa catches her being fondled by a boy outside their apartment building, the narrator reproduces a dialogue that takes place between them, showcasing the girl's spitefulness. The scene with Vanesa builds on the discrimination espoused by the young Pelayo, but enters the realm of the sexual in the first part of the episode before turning to the maternal in its second half. Vanesa begins by provoking Felipa, saying that "-Vosotras a los once o doce años ya estáis liadas, ¿no? -¿Liadas? -Dale que te pego, haciéndolo como conejas" (150) 'You people were already doing it when you were like eleven or twelve, right?' 'Doing it?' 'C'mon or I'll smack you. Doing it like rabbits' (143). Looking to embarrass Felipa with respect to her sexuality, Vanesa, like her brother, uses a discriminatory discourse, articulating not only her racist thoughts on immigrants, but also her sexism. The implication is that immigrants are like animals because they do not control their sexual impulses.

Vanesa, therefore, demeans Felipa during the first part of this encounter by animalizing her. Seeing that her nastiness has not reached its intended outcome, she then proceeds to question her role as a mother:

-¿Te puedo hacer una pregunta?
Su cara de desprecio, de niña resabiada, le revela que la pregunta no va a gustarle.
-Claro.
-¿Qué estás haciendo aquí?
-Trabajo, señorita. Trabajo.
-Me dais asco—su rostro acentúa la repugnancia que siente—. Os venís a España con una mano delante y la otra atrás, a cuidar a los hijos de las otras porque no podéis alimentar a los vuestros. ¿Entonces por qué los tenéis? (151)

"May I ask you a question?"
From the look of contempt on the face of this know-it-all, Felipa is sure the question won't be to her liking. "Of course."
"What are you doing here?"
"Working miss. Working."
"You're revolting." Her face stresses the disgust. "You come to Spain penniless and take care of other people's children because you can't feed your own. Why do you have them then?" (144)

Demonstrating not only spite, Vanesa is both vindictive and vicious, revealing her hatred towards Felipa, her rejection of the immigrant mother that has come to Spain to provide for her children. Vanesa criticizes her role as a mother as we learn that the Filipino maid, who arrived in Barcelona following her husband Manuel's death,

has not seen her children in three years because they are living with Felipa's mother. Vanesa forces Felipa to confront how vulnerable her role as a mother has become, and the scene ends in something of a staredown as Vanesa obtains the answer that she wants from Felipa, depicting her as a bad mother. By heightening the state of Felipa's vulnerability, Vanesa contributes to what will fuel Felipa's turn to crime and ultimate revenge on the family.

The next section continues the personal and humiliating attacks with Laia Masdeu Porta, Pelayo and Vanesa's mother, who is described by the narrator as "una negrera" (152) 'a slave driver' (145). The abuse against Felipa continues *en crescendo*, augmenting during each encounter with a new family member and reaching its climactic point with Laia. To illustrate Laia's intense hatred of the maid, the narrator allows us access into her innermost thoughts as she returns home from the gym through Turó Park, which acts as our narrative frame once again:

Por Dios, todas son iguales. Una manada de muertas de hambre. Y eso que Felipa le dura mucho. Años. Pero de ahí a cogerle un mínimo de cariño . . .

No son más que animales tercermundistas viviendo como ratas en un mundo que se les escapaba. . . . Odia que le roben. Y todas aquellas miserables roban, no pueden evitarlo. Las han educado así. En el fondo debería tenerles pena.

Pero no se la tiene.

Bien que se llevaban el dinero a sus países. (152-53)

For God's sake, they're all alike. A herd of beggars. Although Felipa has been with her for a long time. Years now. But it doesn't mean she's the least bit fond of her . . .

They're nothing more than third world animals living like rats in a society that's beyond them. . . . She hates to be robbed. But all those wretches steal. They can't help themselves. That's the way they've been brought up. Deep inside, she knows she should feel sorry for them.

But she doesn't.

They know well enough to send their money back to their countries. (145-46)

Like her children, Laia espouses an anti-immigrant ideology that is extremely ignorant and racist. Similar to the scene with Vanesa, an animalistic discourse is used—this time likening female immigrants to invasive and disease-ridden rats. Laia uses this immigrant-as-rat metaphor when she threatens Felipa by saying how easy it would be to replace her: "No tengo más que dar una patada en el suelo y me salen cincuenta como usted. ¡Qué digo como usted! ¡Más baratas!" (153) 'I just have to tap my foot and fifty more like you come rushing out. But not even like

you! Cheaper!’(146). Using the rat metaphor, Laia signals the desperation of immigrant women like Felipa willing to work for minimal wages. Although Laia does not necessarily invoke the economic crisis, it is present here as she threatens Felipa with her potential replacements—other immigrants, and perhaps also mothers, in a situation similar to hers. Felipa, then, is not only interchangeable, but also represents how the economic crisis affects immigrant mothers like her. As illustrated in the scene with Vanesa, Felipa’s maternal function has been compromised in order to provide for her family, and though Laia is disgusted by the immigrant invaders who are desperately trying to provide for their children, she realizes that she can use their vulnerable state, as well as their financial and maternal despair, to her benefit.

Employing rodent imagery to devalue Felipa, the comparison to invasive rats prepares us for the end of the episode when Laia looks down at Turó Park from her window, the same park that her maid stares at when she cannot sleep. Again, the narrator gives us access to Laia’s reflections on the matter: “Aquél es su mundo. El resto puede irse al diablo. Aquel rectángulo verde y los edificios que lo circundan. Ésa es su Barcelona, exclusiva, propia, única. El mundo funciona, a pesar de todas las malditas Felipas” (155) ‘This is her world. The rest can go to hell. That green patch and the surrounding buildings. That is her Barcelona, exclusive, unique, her own. The world works, in spite of all the damned Felipas’ (148). Here, it is necessary to reclaim the park and more generally, the city of Barcelona from the “Felipas” that have encroached on her territory. In Laia’s mind, the danger is that these “Felipas,” these immigrant bodies, have come to be, to use Elizabeth Grosz’s term, “‘citified,’ urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body” (242). Grosz proposes that “the city is an active force in constituting bodies, and always leaves its traces on the subject’s corporeality” (250-51). These “Felipas,” therefore, are “Barcelonized” against the wishes of Laia, her family, and others who think like her in the host community.

As Robert Davidson explains, “porosity remains a major source of state anxiety that continues to grow more acute as states struggle to maintain borders and, simultaneously, deal with unofficial or illegal residents who, regardless of their status, begin to take part in the daily life of the nation-state” (7). Here, Turó Park represents such porosity as a transient space or “nonspace” where people move about constantly and anonymously (4).⁷ The park fits into descriptions Davidson has given for other spaces, such as “[a]irports, stations, and hotels,” which “are all spaces occupied by those in transit. They are ports of access, staging grounds for activity by nonresidents and hence represent areas of particular concern” (13). Even within a space of leisure like a park, vigilance, containment, and policing contribute to the new inscription of the immigrant body. According to Grosz, this new inscription of the immigrant body is the result “of negotiation of urban spaces by individuals/groups more or less densely packed, who inhabit and traverse them:

each environment or context contains its own powers, perils, dangers, and advantages” (250). Moreover, “the city’s form and structure provide the context in which social rules and expectations are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity, or position social marginality at a safe or insulated and bounded distance (ghettoization)” (250). In “Barrios altos,” these “Felipas” have infiltrated both the public and private spaces of Barcelona—inhabiting and constantly traversing both—and so a claim to space, and therefore a claim to Barcelona, ensues.

Studying how immigrants are represented in contemporary Spanish films, Ann Davies has noted that the focus in these movies is on space and landscape because interactions with immigrants problematize a claim to space or territory. According to Davies, both the immigrant and the Spaniard “desire to associate with an idea of ‘Spain’,” to claim “Spain” as their own (143). The answer to these claims to space in the films Davies analyzes is “the disappearance from the screen of the immigrant . . . [or] the rendering invisible of the immigrant in films that purport to be about immigration” (143). Giving the example of how African migrants are utilized in Spanish films about immigration, Davies suggests that the intention will be to have them “erased from that space, leaving the Spaniards to occupy the space and the film; and yet the plots of the films come about precisely because of their trace across the landscape” (144). In Sierra i Fabra’s short story, however, this erasure is problematized because the immigrant becomes a body under constant surveillance and abuse, but also a body whose visibility is bothersome, as we see in this episode with Laia. Put differently, Laia is constantly watching Felipa, but is simultaneously perturbed by her visibility. She wants Felipa to be under surveillance, for this allows her to be disciplined and chastised. At the same time, she also desires her invisibility, or her erasure from “her space,” so that Laia can “reclaim” Barcelona.

The final section of this first part of the story concludes with José María Masdeu, Laia’s fifty-five-year-old husband and father to Pelayo and Vanessa, whom the narrator introduces as “un hijo de puta” (155) ‘a son of a bitch’ (148). The opening to this section on José María also recounts how some Moroccans recently stole his Rolex and two of his rings, creating a fear that prompts him to stop wearing jewelry though he is relieved that he no longer has to wear his wedding ring (156; 149). The narrator informs us that Felipa is constantly finding clues that José María is unfaithful and that he engages in suspicious business dealings, which draws attention both to his personal and professional corruption. While less dramatic than her encounter with his wife and two children, Felipa’s conversation with José María finalizes her criminalization because he will not give her a raise or allow her to visit her children in the Philippines during Christmas. Instead, he chastises her for the idea, “Estamos en recesión, ¿entiendes? Sí, ya sé que no tienes ni puta idea de qué te hablo, pero es así. . . . ¿Pero tú pretendes irte justo en la época

en que más trabajo hay en la casa, con las cenas y...? ¡Anda, anda, Felipa, no me marees, ¿vale?” (158) ‘We’re in a recession, do you understand? Yeah, I know you have no fucking idea what I’m talking about, but that’s the way it is. . . . Are you thinking of leaving precisely when there’s the most work, with all the dinner parties and . . . ? C’mon, c’mon, Felipa, don’t mess with me, okay?’ (151). Here, José María points to the effects of the economic crisis on his business and the family, and yet ignores how this same crisis has affected Felipa. In fact, he suggests that Felipa has no idea what he is referring to, thus not only insulting her intelligence, but also signaling how the effects of the crisis on the more vulnerable members of the population are purposefully disregarded.

Pushed to her limits, Felipa “[b]aja la cabeza y sale del despacho. Hace tiempo que ha dejado de llorar sintiéndose peor que una rata, pero esta vez lo hace, en su cuarto, encerrada, hasta que la llaman y sale a escape para ver qué quieren sus amos. Cualquiera de ellos” (158) ‘lowers her head and leaves the office. For some time now, she has stopped crying when she feels worse than a rat, but this time she shuts herself in her room and weeps until she’s called and has to run out to see what her masters want. Any one of her masters’ (152). Again, the symbol of the rat is employed to signify the effects of the mistreatment that she suffers. The inferiority and the vulnerability that she is made to experience devalue her to the point of making her feel worse than the invasive and disease-ridden rodent that she has already been compared to in the previous section with Laia.

While the narrative has been focalized through Felipa, the second part of the story finally centers on her as we obtain our first physical description of the Filipino maid: “Felipa Quijano Quílez tiene treinta y cinco años, pero aparenta cincuenta. Es bajita, de tez aceitunada, ojos dolorosamente cansados, expresión triste, manos gastadas, ánimo gastado, esperanza gastada” (159) ‘Felipa Quijano Quílez is thirty-five years old but looks more like fifty. She’s short, with olive skin, eyes painfully tired, a sad expression on her face, worn-out hands, worn-out hopes’ (152). We note a certain empathy on the part of the narrator, for there is no criticism of Felipa. Instead, we are told how she has informed her family that she will be returning to the Philippines since she has won the Spanish lottery, a sarcastic response on her part that prepares us for the revenge scene that is about to ensue. Moreover, a transformation is noted in Felipa: “[p]orque ya no suda ni tiene miedo. Le ha dado la vuelta a todo. Ahora no es más que una voluntad firme y decidida” (159) ‘She doesn’t sweat now, she feels no fear. She’s worked everything out. Now her will is firm’ (152). In a later flashback scene where she speaks to the druggist about what would happen if humans ingested rat poison, we get more clues about Felipa’s plan and are reminded that Laia has referred to Felipa and other immigrant women as invasive rodents. Thus, Felipa will poison the family with a product intended to exterminate the unwanted—rats—thereby transforming Pelayo, Vanessa, Laia, and José María into that which must be eliminated.

The narrative paints a picture of the family's final feast, "[l]a cena de los príncipes" 'A Royal Dinner,' where Felipa has introduced some rat poison into the soup, the wine, and the rest of the dinner upon the recommendation of the unsuspecting druggist (159-60; 153). In this moment, the crime genre pokes fun at itself as the narrative intersperses a flashback between Felipe and the local druggist, who claims to have become an expert in the uses of rat poison, comically noting "que más de un escritor de novelas policiacas le ha preguntado" (159) 'that more than one writer of detective novels has asked him about this' (153). This metatextual commentary on the generic conventions or clichés of crime fiction is complicated in "Barrios altos" because Felipa, previously compared to a rat and both animalized and abused, now utilizes rat poison as her weapon to avenge her victimization. And yet, during the dinner scene, there is a noted lack of abuse, for only José María critiques the bitter-tasting wine. Otherwise, Felipa's revenge plot using the rat poison has worked perfectly, and once they have finished their dinner, she symbolically packs her bags, ready to go home. Her final thoughts that night turn to her children: "es la prueba de que está tranquila. Muy tranquila. Tanto que sueña cosas felices, en casa, con sus hijos. Ninguna agitación. Ningún sobresalto. Más que sorprendente es extraordinario" (160) 'that's the proof she's relaxed. Very relaxed. So relaxed she dreams of happy things, her house, her children. No agitation. Nothing startling. More than surprising, this is all extraordinary' (153). Realizing that she will be able to be a mother to her children once again, what is still more extraordinary is that the meek and passive maid looks indifferently at the dead bodies the next morning, feeling absolutely nothing (160; 154). Tellingly, her only reaction is that she spits on Laia's cadaver.

As she prepares to leave the high-class apartment, Felipa looks at the park for a final time: "el Turó Park, los jardines del Poeta Eduardo Marquina. Eso sí lo va a echar de menos. En efecto, es el parque más bonito de Barcelona" (161) 'Turó Parc, the poet Eduard Marquina's gardens. This she will miss. It's undoubtedly the prettiest park in Barcelona' (154). The park, a testament to the politics of vulnerability that have governed her life with the family, now marks the completion of this segment. As Felipa gazes at the park that has been the setting for the family's abuse and cruelty towards her, the narrator comments on how Felipa's "rostro no denota emoción alguna. Tampoco siente culpa. En su país a los cerdos se les mata de forma menos piadosa. Lo único que sabe, y esa creencia aumenta por momentos, es que se siente libre. Libre" (161-62) 'face shows no emotion. She doesn't feel guilty either. In her country, they kill pigs in less pious ways. The only thing she knows, and this certainly increases by the minute, is that she is free. Free' (155). Beyond a tool for narrative framing, the park frames the criminal woman's transformation—from vulnerability to criminalized resistance. Completely indifferent and without guilt, Felipa's criminalization has gone hand-in-hand with a dehumanizing performance, with a hardening that the narrator validates by

referring to the injustices that she has suffered as a female migrant domestic worker for this high-class Barcelona family.

In speaking about Felipa's criminal transformation, we are reminded of Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life*, where she claims that

[w]hen we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. . . . It would seem that personification does not always humanize. For Levinas, it may well evacuate the face that does humanize; and I hope to show, personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization. (141)

Giving a "face" to the female migrant domestic worker, as Butler suggests about other marginalized groups, does not necessarily humanize in each instance, and "if it is humanizing in some instances, in what form does this humanization occur, and is there also a dehumanization performed . . . ?" (*Precarious Life* 143). In order to focalize this story through the immigrant mother, to represent her criminalization the potential for dehumanization must also be present, for "violence is engendered in representation," to use Teresa de Lauretis's terminology, where a discursive "technology" must be responsible (33). De Lauretis accentuates that "[t]he very notion of a 'rhetoric of violence,' . . . presupposes that some order of language, some kind of discursive representation is at work not only in the concept 'violence' but in the social practices of violence as well" (32). The same narrative rhetoric that illustrates Felipa's step-by-step criminalization and provides the justification for her murder of the family, a humanizing discourse, must conversely depict a sort of dehumanization at the end because the violence in the way that she is continuously positioned as a vulnerable subject also engenders her criminal act. There is, henceforth, a rebelling against these new politics of vulnerability and othering of the socioeconomic crisis that results in a revenge narrative in "Barrios altos."

For Gentry and Sjoberg, "the mother narratives are used as a way of minimizing women's participation in political violence. . . . they fail to see women as agents who are influenced, enabled and constrained by their wider context" (91). Sierra i Fabra's short story, however, adapts and responds to the mother narrative by combining it with a narrative of vulnerability that moves beyond victimization into the realm of criminalization and violence. Felipa acts out purposefully—it is beyond a maternal instinct, but more so, a call to action due to the precarious situation that she is unable to escape because of her condition as a female migrant domestic worker. Here, I am referring once again to Butler's *Precarious Life*, where

she contends that human relationships are in some ways defined by or based on conditions of vulnerability, which delimit the human condition. This “return[s] us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense” (*Precarious Life* 151).

While there is a representation of Felipa’s precarious situation as a female migrant domestic worker that seeks to humanize and make her visible, vulnerability has a dual function in this text—it exposes her condition as a victim, but also becomes an instrument for criminalization. Vulnerability is responsible for the hybrid condition of this character as a victim-criminal. The narrative encourages the reader’s ambivalent response to Felipa’s crime first by condemning the abusive family’s racist, anti-immigrant discourse and then by collapsing the border between victim and criminal. As the narrative fosters our proximity to Felipa instead of allowing for an analytic distance, it compels the reader to question whether we justify the protagonist’s crime, problematizing Felipa’s guilt as a murderer by underscoring her condition as an abused and marginalized migrant domestic laborer. Put differently, the narrative complicates and then blurs the border between innocence and guilt by not only giving visibility to the migrant domestic worker who remains (or is expected to remain) socially invisible, but also by evoking the reader’s empathy towards Felipa as an immigrant mother who is trying to provide for her family. What is more, in “Barrios altos” the borders of the maternal itself come to be disturbed as the boundaries between mother-as-victim and mother-as-criminal have been erased. Crime fiction is a genre that has always been open to contamination and a blurring of generic borders, and this is made clear in “Barrios altos,” where the boundaries between victimization and criminalization, mother and avenger, and guilt and innocence are likewise disturbed. In “Barrios altos,” the return “to the human,” which in this story means giving representation to the female migrant domestic worker and mother, occurs through criminalization and violence. We find “the human” where we do not expect to find it, where it perhaps does not make sense—in the criminal act.

Notes

1. In criminal narratives as well as in other generic forms, maternal characters continue to oscillate between the domestic angel and the monstrous mother, according to E. Ann Kaplan, who suggests that the tradition has been to create films and television programs “to control fears about the mother” (132). As Barbara Creed emphasizes in her study of female monstrosity in film, “[t]he monstrous mother is central to a number of horror texts. Her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the

male child” (139). The popularity of the castrating mother in horror films, notes Creed, stems from male fears associated with the *vagina dentata*, which “play on the fear of castration and dismemberment” (107). Though referring to a symbolic castration, the idea behind this monstrous mother is that she engulfs or consumes her child’s identity (107).

2. To name just a few of these short story crime fiction anthologies of the past six years: *Barcelona Noir* (2011) (*Barcelona negra* 2013) edited by Adriana V. López and Carmen Ospina, *La ciudad vestida de negro* (‘The City Dressed in Black’ 2012) edited by David G. Panadero, *Todos son sospechosos* (‘All Are Suspects’ 2014) edited by Laura González and Xavier Borrell, *Lecciones de asesinos expertos* (‘Lessons from Expert Killers’ 2016) edited by Anxo do Rego, and *Barcelona Negra* and *Madrid Negro* both published in 2016 and edited by Ernesto Mallo. Female crime short story anthologies include *Fundido en negro* (‘Cast in Black’ 2014), edited by Inmaculada Pertusa Seva, and the anthologies edited by Anna Maria Villalonga, *Elles també maten* (‘Women Also Kill’ 2013) and *Noves dames del crim* (‘New Women Writers of Crime Fiction’ 2015).

3. Suzanne Keen defines empathy in the novel as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (4).

4. With respect to frameworks that enhance the vulnerable state of certain others, Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay clarify that “‘others’ may be exposed to vulnerability as a way of shoring up power, but vulnerability can also be claimed by those who seek to rationalize the subjugation of minorities” (4).

5. In a 2014 interview with Carles Geli, Villalonga emphasizes that woman-centered crime fiction signals the mechanism that leads someone to kill or to be the victim, to know why this violence occurs and not so much the detail of how; the psychological and human factor is sought more than the how it occurred.

6. All translations are by Achy Obejas from “A High-End Neighborhood” in *Barcelona Noir* (2011). The English edition was published prior to the one in Castilian. From the story’s opening sentence, we can already ascertain where the narrator’s sympathies lie, as Pelayo is described as “un cabrón” (145) ‘a bastard’ (138). It is not at all surprising that we obtain a very unflattering physical and mental description of the boy following this first description.

7. For more on the non-space, see Marc Augé’s book, *Non-Places*.

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